

A Biblical Perspective on False Doctrine

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Long before the canon of Scripture was completed, heterodoxy or false doctrine was evident. In fact as soon as God's truth was given it was opposed by some. Wherever on earth there has been truth there has also been error. The pages of Scripture and the record of history verify this.

The longer an error is condoned or tolerated the easier it is to compromise the truth. Somehow a conditioning process goes on. An unhealthy toleration of false doctrine usually leads to accommodation to it. When falsehood is left unchecked, unexposed, or unopposed it gradually seems less and less objectionable. It looks more and more like merely a weak and watered-down form of truth, though, to be sure, a less desirable option than the truth.

At the turn of the century J. Gresham Machen, a great spokesman for orthodoxy, apparently sensed this was happening to many in his day in their understanding of the nature of liberal theology. He spoke to the issue pointedly in his classic work, *Christianity and Liberalism*. The major thesis of this Presbyterian leader was that theological liberalism was not in any sense a form of Orthodox theology.¹ It must not be viewed as partly Christian and partly non-Christian; rather liberal theology was to be seen as non-Christian, heterodox, and anti-Christian. The reason for this bold assertion was that classic liberal theology unashamedly rejected and ridiculed belief in the supernatural Christ of Scripture and the Scripture of Christ.

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Other great defenders of the faith shared Machen's views. Arno C. Gaebelein, for instance, argued strongly that "modernistic" Christianity was "the most dangerous infidelity true Christianity had ever faced."² On the heels of the collapse of old liberal theology with its deification of man and humanization of God came neoorthodoxy, which was built on the same foundation of the higher critical theory of the Bible. Today a new contemporary liberal theology has arisen, which also rests solidly on the higher critical theory of Scripture but speaks with more respect for Christ and the Bible. However, this is the same denial of old pre-war classic liberal theology in new costumes. The wrapping has changed but the package is basically the same.³

How should Bible-believing Christians respond to false doctrine today? How should those who embrace and seek to obey the Bible respond to such teaching and to those who deny the cardinal doctrines of the historic, orthodox Christian faith? The Word of God itself gives instruction on this issue. Five scriptural realities must be faced by those who accept the Bible as their rule of faith and practice.

Prediction of False Teachers and Doctrine

Jesus warned His disciples of those who would "come to [them] in sheep's clothing, but inwardly are ravenous wolves" (Matt 7:15). Repeatedly He alerted His own to the false teaching of the religionists of His day. He also told them that false teachers would come in the future (Matt 24:5).

With a pastor's heart the Apostle Paul put the Ephesian Christians on alert concerning the "savage wolves" who would seek to join and destroy "the flock" (Acts 20:29). The apostle did the same for the believers in Corinth so they would not be "led astray from the simplicity and purity of devotion to Christ" (2 Cor 11:3). He knew some were preaching "another Jesus" (2 Cor 11:4). The saints in Galatia needed the same warning since some of them were already following after "a different gospel" (Gal 1:6) and thereby seeking "to distort the gospel of Christ" (Gal 1:7). "Let him be accursed" (Gal 1:9), Paul said of all who teach a false gospel.

The young preacher Timothy was told that "in later times some will fail away from the faith" giving heed to the "doctrines of devils" (1 Tim 4:1). Like Hymenaeus and Alexander who had already "suffered shipwreck in regard to their faith," others would arise and do the same (1 Tim 1:19-20).

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"Do not be carried away by varied and strange teachings," the saints addressed in the Book of Hebrews were exhorted (Heb 13:9). Peter (2 Pet 2:1) and John (1 John 4:1) both reminded the people of God whom they served about the danger of "false teachers" and "false prophets."

Command to Separate

That false teachers and teachings were present in the early church and would continue and even increase in the last days is a clear teaching of Scripture. Also the Bible gives specific commands to believers to separate from false teachers and false doctrine.

Christians are not to "participate in the unfruitful deeds of darkness, but instead [should] expose them" (Eph 5:11). The words "participate in" (συγκοινωνεῖτε) carry the idea of being "a joint partner with" someone. Eadie's comment on the meaning is to the point: "A line of broad demarcation was to separate the church from the world. Not only was there to be no participation and no connivance, but there was in addition to be rebuke."⁴ Timothy was to recognize that those who advocate "a different doctrine" are "deprived of the truth" (1 Tim 6:3, 5). And he was to avoid those who had only "a form of godliness" but "denied its power" (2 Tim 3:5). The imperative "avoid" is in the present tense and therefore represents a command to continue to turn away from false doctrine. All who name the name of Christ are to "abstain from wickedness" (2 Tim 2:19). Paul said those who teach and promote false doctrine are like vessels of dishonor. The obedient believer who "cleanses himself from these" is "a vessel for honor, sanctified, useful to the Master" (2 Tim 2:21). "Cleanses" translates ἐκκαθάρη "to clean thoroughly." "Timothy is to separate himself from communion with 'these,' the vessels of dishonor spoken of in verse 20 the reference here is to the separated life a Christian should live. Here it has direct application to the obligation of a pastor to refuse to fellowship in the work of the ministry with another pastor who is a modernist."⁵

Christians at Corinth were charged with the solemn responsibility to set themselves apart from idolatry and idol worshipers (2 Cor 6:14-16). The principle of separation from error of any kind is clear; the command was unmistakable. "Come out from their midst and be separate, says the Lord. And do not touch what is unclean" (2 Cor 6:17). In verses 14-16 Paul referred to several Old Testament passages where the truth of separation from false teaching

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was also taught. With verse 17 he drew practical implications from the truth stated in verse 16 that believers are the temple of the living God.

The older shrines were separated off from the world around them so that Christians must be spiritually and morally withdrawn from the pagan society in which they have

to live. Paul's appeal to the Corinthians to make this withdrawal is given in words originally spoken by God to His people through Isaiah when He called them out of exile. They were to leave in Babylon everything that was unclean, taking only the sacred vessels of the temple so that they might continue to be a people whom God could *receive*, i.e., whom He could look upon with favor (seelsaiah 52:11).⁶

God, through the Apostle Paul, pronounced a curse on those who proclaimed a false gospel (Gal 1:9). It would seem to follow then that the Christians should not be in fellowship with anyone who stands under the judgment of God. Surely those who reject such foundational doctrines as the absolute deity of Christ and the divine authority of the Bible do not stand in God's favor, but are under His disfavor and judgment.

John, the apostle of love, had some strong words of exhortation for believers in regard to false doctrine. John's chief concern was the person and work of Christ. He wrote, "Anyone who...does not abide in the teaching of Christ, does not have God" (2 John 9). In this way he made clear the total falsity of the view described. But what is to be the believers' response to such false teachers and teaching? John said, "Do not receive him into your house, and do not give him a greeting" (2 John 10). This referred to a formal visit by an official, not just a casual visit from a stranger. A teacher who claimed authority was in view.⁷ If a Christian disobeyed this in unction he was one who "participates in his [the false teachers] evil deeds" (2 John 11). The word translated "participates" (κοινωνεῖ) "implies more than participation in the definite acts. It suggests fellowship with the character of which they are the outcome."⁸

In 3 John the apostle wrote of the need for believers to receive other faithful believers who were itinerant evangelists so that they "may be fellow workers with the truth" (3 John 8). This is the exact opposite response the believers are to have toward false teachers. In 3 John 8 fellow believers are to be welcomed and given hospitable support; in 2 John 10, by contrast, false teachers are to be avoided. Westcott's comment on the exhortation in 3 John is helpful: "Fellowship may be either with the teachers 'that we may be fellow workers with them in support of the truth'; or (better) with the

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truth, the substance of their teaching; that we may help the truth which is effective through them."⁹

The biblical teaching seems clear enough. The issue of separation from apostasy is settled for those who claim allegiance to the Word of God. The believer's responsibility is now to obey.

A more difficult biblical truth for many to accept and obey is separation from Christian brethren who persist in walking in disobedience. Two passages in God's Word address the question of a believer's fellowship with other believers who embrace false doctrine.

The Corinthian Christians were told in a clear, unmistakable command to "remove the wicked man from among yourselves" in their assembly. This man, guilty of immorality and refusing to confess it (1 Cor 5:13), was called "wicked" and was to be removed. The saints at Thessalonica were told also to "keep aloof ['withdraw,' KJV] from every brother who leads an unruly life...not according to the tradition which you received from us" (2 Thess 3:6).

Paul enjoins them to *withdraw* from such. The verb *stellesthai* was used earlier in its history for such activities as furling sails. It signifies the withdrawing into oneself holding oneself aloof from the offender in question. This is not to be done in a spirit of superiority. The appeal to brotherliness shows that it is part of a man's duty to the brotherhood that he should not condone the deeds of any who, while acclaiming the name of brother, nevertheless denies by his actions what the brotherhood stands

Interestingly when Paul wrote to the same Christians in Corinth and Thessalonica concerning two specific doctrines which were being denied by some among them, he did not command the faithful to separate. Some in the church of Corinth were denying the doctrine of the resurrection (1 Cor 15:12). The Thessalonian Christians were being deceived by the false teaching that the predicted “day of the Lord” was already present (2 Thess 2:2–3). Yet in these cases separation from those who were teaching the false doctrines was not advocated. This raises two questions. First, must God tell believers to separate from brethren holding false doctrine every time He mentions false teaching? Second, over which doctrines of the faith are Christians to break fellowship with other believers? The Bible does not give specific answers to either of these questions. However, in response to the first certainly God need not state something more than once for it to be true.

What about what has been called second-degree separation or third-, fourth-, or even fifth-degree separation? Are God’s people to

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separate from others of God’s people who do not separate? How far removed from the original offender should one carry the matter of separation? Specific answers to these questions are not given in the Bible. Each case it would seem, therefore, must be decided on its own merits. In making such a decision a believer must be sure he does not disobey any clearly stated teachings of Scripture.

Proper Attitude in Separation

Too often separatists forget that the biblical doctrine of separation is positive and not just negative.¹¹ The proper sequence of these opposites is imperative. Unless one is first separated to God all separation from apostasy will have little value. The scriptural commands to “contend earnestly for the faith” (Jude 3) and to “retain the standard of sound words” (2 Tim 1:13) refer not to their own personal views but to the body of truth committed to believers. This requires complete dedication to the Lord and His Word. Determination to defend an organization or one’s own views often replaces the command to contend and “continue in the faith” (Col 1:23) and to be “abounding in the work of the Lord” (1 Cor 15:58).

Unfortunately opposition to and separation from someone ensnarled in false doctrine is often done without love, humility, and prayer. Human nature is such that it is easier to lash out at someone than it is to love. It is often easier to be harsh toward and to hate the erring one than it is to be humble in spirit. It is often easier to pronounce judgment than it is to pray for those in error.

Yet Scripture clearly reveals that Christians are to exercise love for those from whom they separate (1 Tim 1:5–7). Prayers are to be made for “all men,” which would include even those who hold false doctrine and oppose God’s Word (1 Tim 2:1). Humility is to characterize those who seek to restore one “caught in any trespass,” whatever that sin may be (Gal 6:1). What is needed in these days of increased efforts toward church union and widespread adherence to false doctrine is simple obedience to God’s commands—obedience not only to separate from these but also to be completely separated to God. The biblical commands to separate are not completely followed unless love and humility characterize the believer. Paul put it bluntly when, immediately after giving an exhortation against false doctrine, he wrote, “The goal of our instruction is love from a pure heart and a good conscience and a sincere faith” (1 Tim 1:5).

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Purposes of Separation

The purpose of separating from false teachers and their doctrines is to encourage those ensnared in error to be obedient to God's Word. Other purposes include honoring God and His Word, defending the doctrinal purity of the church and its testimony, and restraining sin and Satan's work in the world. Still another purpose is to help and restore erring brethren. Those older in the faith are responsible to show new and immature Christians the seriousness of their faith. Affiliation with the enemies of the Cross spells a lie to all claims to believe the truth.

Schaeffer bluntly stated the issue of believers' responsibility toward false doctrine and those who promote it.

Thus it must be said that in spite of (and even because of) one's commitment to evangelism and cooperation among Christians, I can visualize times when the only way to make plain the seriousness of what is involved in regard to a service or an activity where the Gospel is going to be preached is *not* to accept an official part if men whose *doctrine* is known to be an enemy are going to be invited to officially participate. In an age of relativity the practice of truth when it is costly is the only way to cause the world to take seriously our protestations concerning truth. Cooperation and unity that do not lead to purity of life and purity of doctrine are just as faulty and incomplete as an orthodoxy which does not lead to a concern for, and a reaching out toward, those who are lost.¹²

¹ J. Gresham Machen, *Christianity and Liberalism* (Philadelphia: The Presbyterian Guardian, 1923).

² Arno C. Gaebelein, *The Conflict of the Ages* (Arno C. Gaebelein, 1933), p. 64.

³ See Robert P. Lightner, *Neo-Liberalism* (Nutley, NJ: Craig Press, 1972).

⁴ John Eadie, *Commentary on the Epistle to the Ephesians* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, n.d.), p. 382.

⁵ Kenneth Wuest, *The Pastoral Epistles in the Greek New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1952), pp. 139-40.

⁶ R. V. G. Tasker, *The Second Epistle of Paul to the Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1974), pp. 99-100.

⁷ Brooke Foss Westcott, *The Epistles of St. John* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1952), p. 230.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 231.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 239.

¹⁰ Leon Morris, *The Epistles of Paul to the Thessalonians* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1974), p. 144.

¹¹ The following three paragraphs are adapted from the author's *Church Union* (Des Plaines, IL: Regular Baptist Press, 1971), pp. 128-29.

¹² Francis Schaeffer, *The God Who Is There* (Chicago: InterVarsity Press, 1968), p. 169.